A SURVEY OF THE EXTANT STUPAS OF NORTH BIHAR

Madan Mohan Singh

It is well-known that North Bihar in the time of the Buddha, with headquarters at Vaiśālī, was a powerful political entity playing a dominant role in the contemporary politics. Vaiśālī, being the capital of a great republic with the tradition of honouring democratic institutions and free thinking, was not unwelcome to the religious ideas preached by the Buddha, Mahāvīra & Makkhali Gośāla. As Mahāvīra hailed from Vaiśālī, it was natural for him to find followers in a large number in his birth place, but in the case of the Buddha also we find that he turned Vaiśālī to be a stronghold of Buddhism like Rājagṛha and Śrāvastī. When the Buddha attained *Mahāparinirvāṇa* at Kuśīnagara, the Vajjians of Vaiśālī claimed share of the corporal remains of the Lord and took the credit of erecting one of the eight Stūpas containing the Buddha's ashes.[1] Thereafter, the activity of constructing Stūpas was given great impetus by Aśoka which continued with vigour for many centuries, the evidence of which has been brought to light by archaeological explorations and excavations, both earlier and recent. The available evidence reveals that Stūpas were raised throughout North Bihar but priority was given to those places which had been the scenes of the activities of the Buddha and thus most of the early Stūpas were constructed in the western portion of the region often visited by him. Traditionally Aśoka is credited with the construction of eighty-four thousand Stūpas all over his domain and it is very likely that in South Bihar he got Stūpas raised at intervals along the route followed by the Buddha in his last journey from Rājagṛha to Kuśīnagara. Aśoka himself had undertaken a pilgrimage to the Buddha's birth place along this route and pillars were raised by him at intervals, and it has been noticed that Stūpas of north Bihar are mostly associated with Aśokan pillars at Vaiśālī, Lauriya, Rampurva, etc. Recently found Stūpas at Banmankhi in the district of Purnea is also associated with an Aśokan pillar.[2]

The origin of the tradition of constructing Stūpas is still a matter of controversy, but basically the Stūpa is a burial mound and the custom

1 *Digha Nikāya*, II. 164-67.

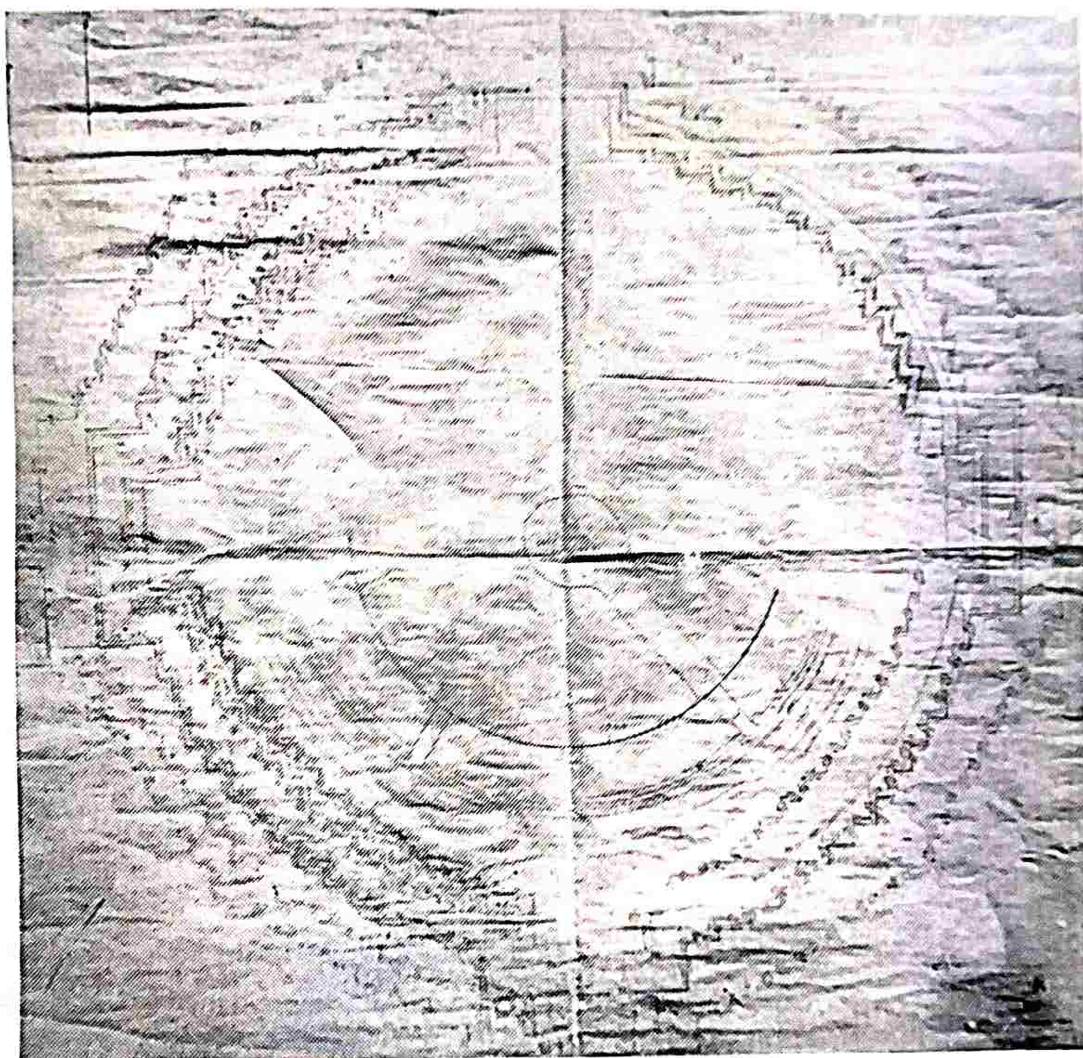
2 Information supplied by the Mid-Easten circle of the Archaeological Survey of India, Patna,

of raising mounds over the burials was prevalent in the different regions of Europe, Africa and Asia under different designations. The earliest Stūpas would not appear externally much different from round barrows of the West. Compared with the Megalithic mound, except for the stone uprights, the mound rising above the ground looked from a distance would appear to be similar to one of the earliest Buddhist Stūpas. In the case of the Megalith, generally a rectangular chamber was provided in the centre for burial, and in some cases there used to be a circumbulatory passage round the main burial. The external resemblance between the early Stūpas and the round barrows is so close that Cunningham took the mounds at Lauriya to be earthen barrows, as was the case with Carlleyle, one of his assistants. Garrick, Carlleyle and Bloch, the early excavators of the mounds at Lauriya, mistook them for burial mounds. Carlleyle thought that they were family or community funerary monuments. The reason why the early excavators failed to recognise that the mounds represented Stūpa was the resemblance between the barrow and the Stūpa. This is suggestive of the common origin of the two practices of raising mounds. But if we do not recognise common origin, it is clear that in the past this custom widely prevailed with certain variations according to the ritualistic differences of those who raised the mounds.

That the Buddhist Stūpa had its origin in the earlier practice of raising a mound where the dead was buried is supported by the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* which represents the Buddha as stating that Stūpas were constructed on cross-roads for enshrining the ashes of the *Chakravartī* kings. Cunningham who noticed at Kesariya, 30 miles to the north-west of Vaiśālī, a mound with a Stūpa at the top, which people attributed to *Chakravartī* king Veṇa was led to justify the tradition in the light of the Buddhist account of raising Stūpas for *Chakravartī* kings at the meeting point of four principal roads, as the spot marks the meeting of four important thoroughfares.[3] It is not unlikely that an earthen mound which may have been raised in honour of a king was later converted into a Buddhist Stūpa. It appears that such mounds of the past remained unnoticed and mainly being simple heaps of earth, in due course were levelled for cultivation.

Carlleyle, who was an assistant of Cunningham, noticed in the last quarter of the 19th century hundreds of small grass covered mounds of various heights to the west of Lauriya which he thought to be barrows.

3 Cunningham, A., *The Ancient Geography of India*, pp. 511-12.



Stūpa at Lauriya Nandangarh

The appearance of mounds in a large number in the plain is suggestive of their association with funeral practice. But as these mounds have not been investigated properly, no definite conclusion is possible. In this connection the hymns of the Xth *Maṇḍala* of the *Rigveda* mentioning the practice of invoking Pitṛis for holding fast the pillar and to protect the dead from the abode of destruction may be regarded as referring to raising burial mounds with a pillar in the centre. The funerary mounds of the Vedic Āryans are referred to in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* which measured seven to eight feet in diameter sufficient for accommodating one body, rising 7'-8' high in case of a Kṣatriya.[4] It contained an *Agnichiti* at the centre.[5] The Buddhists being opposed to Vedic sacrifices discarded the provision of *Agnichiti,* but they replaced it with a chamber for enshrining the relic.

There was also another tradition before the Buddhists, i.e. of raising small mounds known as Chaityas for the purpose of worshipping. Chaitya was used in the sense of a shrine or a religious monument or simply a place of worship. The Buddhist texts refer to many Chaityas which existed in the time of the Buddha and thus the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* speaks of seven Chaityas at Vaiśālī by name which were visited by the Buddha. The Brāhmaṇical tradition of raising tumullii over the dead and that of Chaityas probably became infused to give place to the practice of Stūpa worship in Buddhism. Still another feature which deserves attention is that the Chaityas portrayed on the Bharhut coping stones are basically *Vṛkṣa* Chaityas. The conception of *Vṛkṣa* Chaitya is very old and it got mixed up with Stūpa. It may be pointed out here that trees were not only provided with railings for worshipping, but platforms also may have been provided at the root, a custom which is seen even today. The association of sacred platform with the tree is a common feature and in the time of the Buddha when tree worship was popular, the practice of worshipping tree Chaityas seems to have been mixed up with that of Stūpa worship.

The ruins of ancient Vaiśālī are found distributed over a wide area of about 12 square miles. As a stronghold of Buddhism, this city witnessed Stūpas and monasteries rising above the ground from the early historical period onwards, to about the 6th century A.D. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien had seen five Stūpas at Vaiśālī, one

4 *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa,* XIII. 8. 1. 17.

5 *Ibid.,* VIII. 8. 3

inside the city and four outside it—one to the north of the city outside the west gate, one three *li* to the north-west of the city and another one three or four *li* to the east of this Stūpa.[6] But the Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang saw about ten Stūpas and visited a monastery inhabited by Bhikkshus belonging to the Sammitiya sect of Buddhism[7]. The account of Huen Tsang as regards the existence of Stūpas and monasteries at Vaiśālī appears to be correct as the relic Stūpa and the Stūpa by the side of the pillar are among those mentioned by him. The relic Stūpa was excavated in 1958 by the excavation unit of Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, now merged in the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Bihar, but the Stūpa near the Mauryan pillar has not been fully exposed and its excavation was recently undertaken by the Mid-Eastern Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India There is evidence to the effect that the earlier Stūpas of clay or sun-dried bricks were later enlarged and given finer look. Important Stūpas went through several successive enlargements, a feature noticed throughout the country. The relic Stūpa of the Buddha at Vaiśāli was enlarged four times after it was first raised in the fifth century B.C.[8] The original mud-built Stūpa was enlarged and converted into a Stūpa of burnt bricks by Aśoka, who is said to have opened the relic Stūpas and distributed the corporal remains of Buddha among the 84000 Stūpas built by him according to the tradition recorded in the *Divyāvadāna* and referred to by Huen Tsang.

All early Stūpas were mud Stūpas and later many of them were encased by brick structures and thus enlarged. This feature is for the first time referred to in the Nigalisagar Pillar inscription of Aśoka when he speaks of the enlargement of a Stūpa to double of its original size. The enlargement of the Stūpa in Buddhist tradition was regarded as a work of religious merit which induced the lay disciples to encase the earlier smaller Stūpas within the enlarged circles. The famous Stūpa of Sanchi, originally built by Aśoka, was later enlarged to double of its original size. The relic Stūpa of Vaiśālī shows four enlargements. Originally it was a small mud-built structure only 26′ 6″ in diameter. Its height as indicated by its slope on the south-western quadrant would not have been higher than about 12 feet. But some mud Stūpas were of considerable size, e.g. the two mounds called Bhīmsena Kā Pallā at Vaiśālī measuring 183' and 179' diameter at the base.[9]

6 Giles, H. A., *Travels of Fa-Hsien*. pp. 41-44.
7 Watters, T., *Yuan Chwang*, p. 63.
8 B. P. Sinha and S. R. Roy, *Vaishali Excavation* 1958-62.
9 *J. B. R. S.*, 1967, p. 69, foot-note.

An important feature of Stūpa architecture, revealed by the enlargements, is the provision of four platforms at the four cardinal points known as *Āyakapaṭas* or *Āryakapaṭas*. This feature is common with the extant Stūpas at Amaravati, Nagarjuni-Konda and others in the South. The *Āyakapaṭas* were holy platforms, intended probably for placing offerings. The occurance of this feature would show that it was not a feature peculiar to the Stūpas of South and that the difference marked between the *Āyakapaṭas* of the original Stūpa at Vaiśālī and those of the South refers to the gap of time and also place.[10].

Besides enlarging the relic Stūpa, Aśoka built another Stūpa which stands to the north of the Mauryan pillar at Kolhua, Vaiśālī, referred to above. This Stūpa witnessed three phases of construction. Originally it was a solid brick structure with rammed concrete basement. Its first enlargement took place in *c.* first century B. C. and the second in *c.* first century A. D. as suggested by the strategraphical evidence. The latest enlarged Stūpa corresponds in plan to the Dharmarājikā Stūpa.[11]

In addition to the above, those worth mentioning are the mounds of mud Stūpas of considerable size, known as Bhīmasena Kā Pallā, one at the Virpur Chour known as Mārpasauna and the brick Stūpa below Shah Kajin Ka Dargah. The last is the biggest mound and appears to represent an important Stūpa. Fa-Hsien refers to a Stūpa inside the city of Vaiśālī which was buit by Āmrapālī in honour of the Buddha.[12] It is not unlikely that this conspicuous mound may represent the Stūpa originally got raised by Āmrapālī and later encased with brick dome.

Apart from the site of ancient Vaiśālī, the district contains ruins of many Stūpas, such as those at the villages of Ghataraw and Madhurapur about 10 kilometers north and 20 kilometers east of Hajipur respectively; Rampur, 10 kilometers north of Desri Railway Station; Turki, five kilometers south-east of Bhagwanpur Railway Station; and Chechar, 20 kilometers east of Hajipur. The Stūpa at Ghataraw on the eastern bank

10 For details of the *Āyakapaṭas* associated with the different phases of the enlargement of the Stūpa, see Ray, S R., 'The Stupa Architecture of Vaisali', *JBRS*, 1967.

11 The above account is based on information supplied by Sri V. K. Mishra, Superintending Archaeologist, Mid-Eastern circle, A, S. I. and Sri D, P, Sinha, the Technical Assistant, But as the Stūpa has not been completely cleared full details are not available.

12 Giles, H, A., *The Travels of Fa-Hsien*, p. 41.

of Gandak appears to be quite interesting. The name Ghataraw apears to be a debased form of Sanskrit word Ghaṇṭārava, as Huen Tsang mentions a Stūpa by the name Gong-call.[13] The Chinese pilgrim who saw the Stūpa has recorded an interesting story associated with it in his account. Accordingly, the Stūpa stood in the centre of an extensive *Saṅghārāma* which had a bell, usually sounded for calling the monks to assemble for discussion. The monks of the monastery were well versed in the texts and renowned for their scholarship, but in course of time it became devoid of learned Bhikkshus, and when a group of Brāhmaṇical Sanyasins challenged them by sounding the bell, they failed to prove themselves a match to their opponents in *Śāstrārtha.* The Sanyasins demanded the stopping of the custom of sounding the bell for the assemblage of Bhikkshus which was accepted by the king acting as the mediator. Later, when Deva, a disciple of Nāgārjuna, the well-known Buddhist scholar of the country defeated the opponents, the earlier practice of sounding the bell which had been silenced for more than twelve years was restored. The Gong call monastery which is proposed to be identified with Ghataraw, is said to have been located to the north-west of the Amalaka Stūpa of Aśoka which would place it in Pāṭalīputra. But the above story speaks of Bhikkshus defeated as belonging to Vaiśālī and the disciple of Nagarjuna is referred to as going for *Śāstrārtha* against the Vaiśālian opponents.[14] If the Gong call Stūpa lay within the territorial limits of Vaiśālī, then there seems no doubt in regarding it identical with the Stūpa at Ghataraw.

The Stūpa mound at Madhurapur is sufficiently high, approached to the top by a staircase of 80 steps and it may belong to the days of the Pālas enveloping an earlier Stūpa. The place situated on the northern bank of Ganga may have been visited by the Buddha or one of his chief disciples. The mound at Nawanagar also appears to represent a Stūpa. The village Rampur is definitely a site of antiquity from where sherds of Black-and-Red ware and N. B. P. were collected, and the bricks used in the Stūpa are suggestive of the existence of a monastic complex between the 8th and 12th centuries A. D. The site at village Turki was recently exposed by the Gandak Project which passes about fifty meters west of the Stūpa mound, which rises about five meters high above the walking level. The site extending over an area of half an acre appears to represent the ruins of a large monastic complex of Śuṅga-Kuṣāṇa

13 Watters, T., *Yuan Chwang*, vol, II, p. 100.
14 *Ibid*

period around the central Stūpa. The antiquities collected from the site include sherds of Black-and-Red and N. B. P. wares and Śuṅga-Kuṣāṇa pottery and terracotta figurines. This newly exposed site may turn of much interest in future as it had been in occupation for a long period. Similarly Chechar, 10 miles east of Hajipur, is also a site representing remains of Stūpas. This village to the north of Gandak lies on the ancient route from Pāṭaliputra to Vaiśālī and its historical nature is revealed by the presence of many Stūpa like mounds near it. Huen-Tsang refers to the *Samghārāma* of Fei-to-pu-lo[15] and it may be taken as standing for Vidupur, a debased form of Sanskrit Vidatpur. The said *Samghārāma* was a huge monastic establishment and may have been known by this name due to the scholarship of its monks. The name Tu-po-lo also deserves some consideration. This appears to stand for Thupapur (Stūpapur). A settlement marked by several Stūpas in due course may have assumed this designation as places become known by their peculiarities. At the area further north of the said site one finds a series of mounds which are unexplored, and it is not unlikely that they may reveal some historical facts still unknown.

Mounds at Bhat Pokhar, Belwa, Chirand, Meghi, etc., in the district of Saran, yielding antiquities associated with Buddhism, seem to represent remains of Stūpas. A Stūpa mound was noticed by Hoey at Bhat Pokhar in 1900 which he proposed to identify with the Droṇa Stūpa.[16] Balwa about nine kilometers to the north-west of Gopalganj is another probable Stūpa site. This village contains two mounds, one locally called Bhairo-sthāna and the other attributed to Bhars, but so far no Stūpa has been identified. The geographical location of Chirand, the well-known archaeological site, is suggestive of its selection as a suitable site for raising a Stūpa here. The Buddhist nature of the site was noticed as early as the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Small bricks with convex curve were seen in the ruins by Hunter,[17] and later Buddhist images collected in a temple were seen by N. L. De in 1902. Carlleyle suggested the identification of the mound with the Droṇa Stūpa. De proposed to derive the name Chirand from Chira (=a portion cut off) + Ānd (abbreviation of Ānanda) and

15 Watters, T., *Yuan Chwang*, vol. II, p. 80.

16 *JASB*, 1901, p. 30.

17 *Statistical Account of the District*, 1977.

attempted to explain it in the light of the Buddhist story of how after the death of Ānanda his corporal remains were divided into two, over one of which a Stūpa was erected by the Lichchhavis. But Fa-Hsien and Huen-Tsang both speak of the relic Stūpa of Ānanda at Vaiśālī. According to Fa-Hsien it was the same Stūpa which he saw to the north of the city. Huen-Tsang's statement as regards this is self contradictory as he speaks also of another Stūpa enshrining the corporal remains of Ānanda on the northern bank of Ganga facing Pāṭaliputra.[18] Therefore relying on the account of Fa-Hsien which is more precise, it may be concluded that the Stūpa which he saw to the north of Vaiśālī was the Stūpa built over the relics of Ānanda. Proposals to identify the remains of any other Stūpa with Ānanda's Stūpa are to be ignored. The Chinese pilgrims record the tradition of Ānanda's attaining *Nirvāṇa* on the mid-stream of Ganga and Fa-Hsien clearly mentions that the corporal remains after cremation were divided into two equal portions between Ajātaśatru and the Vaiśālians, and each built a Stūpa over its share after returning home.[19] From this account it becomes clear that Stūpa's in honour of Ānanda's ashes were erected in Magadha and Vaiśālī and it is not correct to assume on the basis of Huen-Tsangs' contradictory account that Stūpas were built on both banks of Ganga. When the Buddha attained *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, his ashes were taken away by the claimants to their respective territories, and the same may have been the case with Ānanda's corporal remains.

Nandangarh Stūpa in the district of Champaran is the most conspicuous not only in North Bihar, but taking India as a whole. With a diameter of nearly 556' in its latest enlarged phase it was suspected by Bloch to be the remains of a fort. The mound of this huge Stūpa was first noticed in 1861 by Cunningham and the top was superfluously dug by Garrick in 1880 in which an inscribed earthen lamp, probably in Aśokan Brāhmī, was found. Smith thought that the mound may be Buddha's relic Stūpa constructed by Aśoka. Excavation of the mound was undertaken by N. G. Majumdar in 1935-36 and was continued in 1940-41 by A. Ghosh. Majumdar's excavation revealed that the mound represented a rough brick built Stūpa of stupendous dimensions, unparalleled of the period in which built. Ghosh found at the depth of 14' remains of a brick altar and at the depth of 35' an intact miniature

18 Watter, T., *Yuan Chwang*, vol. *II*, p. 80.
19 Giles, H. A., *The Travels of Fa-Hsien*, p. 44.

Stūpa of stone, complete with a surmounting umbrella. By the side of the interior Stūpa was found a copper vessel containing a birch leaf manuscript which was too fragile and could not even be spread, but whatever could be drawn from it showed that its palaeography belonged to the 4th century A.D. This proved that the original Stūpa was enlarged in the 4th century A.D.[20]

The latest excavation of this mound has revealed some interesting features of Stūpa architecture. When complete, it consisted of nine terraces raised one above the other. This superb example does not resemble the Paharpur Stūpa, as earlier held by scholars. The monument is polygonal or star-shaped in plan with a diameter of 556' and four *Āryakas* at the cardinal points, measuring 104' in length separated from each other by 266 feet. Each quadrant (between the *Āryakas*) was covered by 28 sides, i.e. 14 angles and 13 corners. Patil thought that the Stūpa was provided with two circumbulatory paths, but as brought out by Shri D. P. Sinha in his recent excavation of the mound, the entire structure at first was built on a polygonal plan in nine terraces from top to bottom and later, except the bottom star-shaped terrace, the remaining terraces were enclosed by circular walls so as to give the structure the shape of a pagoda. The space between the original conical or star-shaped wall and the new wall was filled with earth. That the Stūpa was provided with no upper *Pradakṣiṇāpatha* is also shown by the absence of any staircase leading to the terraces. The only decoration seen in the original structure is in the form of a course of moulded bricks with rounded edge running all along the face of the wall. Originally it appears to have been a huge earthen mound, similar to the supposed sepulchral mound of the locality, as shown by a cross section cut through the centre of the Stūpa. The Nandangarh Stūpa with a star-shaped base and elevation like the pagoda is a type in itself. When I saw it for the first time, being encircled by a tank, it appeared to me that it was fashioned to give the impression of a full blossomed lotus.

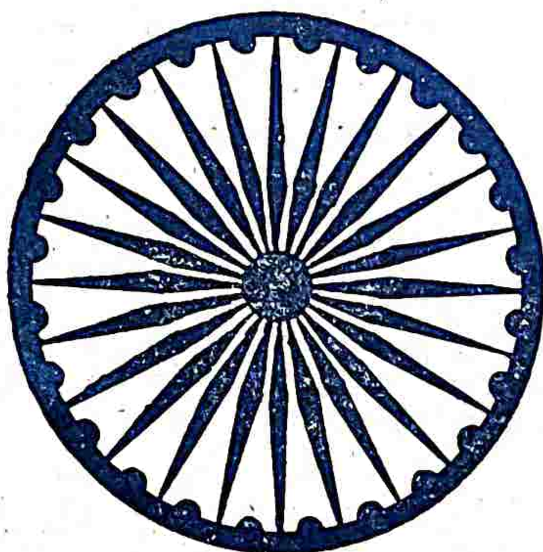
At Sagardih, 13 miles south of Motihari, 4 miles south-west of Pipra on road to Kesariya, stands an extensive mound which was noticed by Cunningham in 1880-81 and needs attention. As earlier observed the western portion of north Bihar abounds in Stūpa mounds which need further investigation.

20 For the Report of Ghosh's Excavation of the Stūpa, see *Archaeology in India—A Review*, 1950.

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